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THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENT IN ANCIENT HISTORY

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Each student of history—whether ancient or modern history—approaches his study of the subject from his own particular standpoint, and this is why the present writer has singled out the particular event to be dealt with below, and also why he expects his opinion to be challenged. Perhaps by some the event will be regarded as the merest incident in the life of the past, one of the misfortunes so likely to happen during a campaign, and they will, perhaps, point to some great revolution or bloody war or some great conquest as of more importance. But what determines the importance of an event? Is it the fact that it changed a dynasty, or gave one nation a position greater than that of another nation, or changed the appearance of the map of the world? Or is it the fact that it had untold consequences for the future as well as the present? Surely this latter is the more correct standard for judgment. It is because of this standard that we give the destruction of the army of Sennacherib (II Kings 19:35-36) in the reign of King Hezekiah (701 B.C.) as the most important event in the history of the past.

This event was more momentous for the succeeding centuries than the retreat of Napoleon from Moscow or the battle of Waterloo for the modern world. The eighth century B.C., was a momentous one. For a century Assyria had

been playing her part in the politics of the Orient. A series of strong kings had risen and had reconquered the territory lost by the old Assyrian kingdom. By 800 B.C. the armies of Assyria had marched throughout the length and breadth of Syria. During the eighth century the vigorous Tiglath-pileser IV (745-727 B.C.) not only pushed the boundaries of the empire to the very confines of Egypt, but, what is of vastly more importance, had welded the many parts of the empire into a whole. He broke with the system of the past and, instead of allowing the conquered kings to reign as vassals, he placed Assyrian viceroys over the conquered peoples. His successor, Shalmaneser IV (727-722 B.C.), went against Samaria, which, after two years' stubborn resistance, was taken by Sargon II (722-705 B.C.), who also broke up an alliance between Egypt and Philistia, defeating the armies at Raphia. Later he subdued Babylon. His son and successor, Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.), regarded by his vassals as a weakling, soon proved himself a vigorous ruler. We need not deal with the many events of his reign except as they have a bearing upon the event we are considering.

Now let us look at this event we have described as so important. Sargon II, having died in 705 B.C., was succeeded by his son Sennacherib. The Eastern world, no doubt regarding the son as

too weak to carry out the policies of his father, determined to harass him, if not to drive him out. One by one the vassal nations revolted. The trouble apparently began with Merodach-baladan II, a ruler who had been driven from Babylon by Sargon but who had evidently again gained control. Elam joined Merodach-baladan, as did also the people of Mesopotamia and some of the Arab tribes. Not feeling strong enough to attack Sennacherib, they made an effort to induce the vassals of the West and South to join the coalition. The Judean king, Hezekiah, with the Philistine and Phoenician rulers, Edom, Moab, and Ammon, were induced to join the revolt. Padi, the king of Ekron, was imprisoned by the rebels because he would not join them. Egypt, under Tirhakah, the Ethiopian king, promised to aid the rebels and preparations were made for war. But they had misunderstood the character of the man they were opposing. Only one man seems to have seen what it would mean. Isaiah understood him. "Rejoice not, O Philistia, all of thee, because the rod [Sargon] that smote thee is broken: for out of the serpent's root shall come forth a basilisk, and his fruit [Sennacherib] shall be a fiery serpent" (Isa. 14:29).

No doubt Sennacherib was a vain-glorious king, and in some respects weak. From the standpoint of a soldier, however, he was a remarkable leader. His hesitancy was part of the plan, not a sign of weakness. When the rebels were least expecting it he threw himself upon Merodach-baladan and conquered him. The East being subdued, Sennacherib

turned to the West and soon the rebels were falling like grain before the sickle. Phoenicia was attacked (701 B.C.). Sidon and other cities were captured, the Phoenician king Lulia fleeing to Cyprus. After ravaging "forty-six of his [Hezekiah's] strong cities, fortresses, and small cities which were round them, which were without number,"¹ Sennacherib gave his attention to Jerusalem, where Hezekiah, "like a caged bird in Jerusalem,"² waited for the end. After exacting a great tribute, even demanding the daughters of the king for his harem, Sennacherib moved on. All might have been well from this time had not the forces under Tirhakah suddenly appeared. At once Sennacherib saw the mistake he had made in leaving a powerful fortress like Jerusalem in his rear; and now, in spite of the treaty, he broke faith and came against the city a second time, demanding its complete surrender and its occupation by an Assyrian garrison. The presence of Isaiah nerved Hezekiah to resist these demands. After defeating the Egyptians at el Tekeh, on the Judean border, Sennacherib came against the city and determined upon its capture. What happened we do not know.³ We are told that "the angel of the Lord went forth in the night and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred four score and five thousand" (II Kings 19:35). According to Herodotus the Egyptians had preserved an account of this disaster, which they attributed to mice. Such is the event.

In what sense is this the most important event? Not the fact that Sennach-

¹ Translation by G. Smith.

² *Ibid.*

³ G. A. Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, pp. 157-58.

erib never again troubled that part of the world. Looking at the history of the Hebrews we can see that had Sennacherib succeeded in capturing Jerusalem on this occasion, the history of the whole world would have been turned into a different channel from the one in which it has run. This is by no means an exaggeration. Egypt had a work to do in this world which she could not have done had the event turned out differently. But it is with the Hebrew nation alone we wish to deal, for it is through this nation that the event has proved so remarkable.

In the first place, the nation was again brought to see that it was in the hands of Yahweh and that its holy city was his special care. This was hardened into a dogma later on, a dogma bringing with it disaster. In the second place, the Temple became, in the eyes of the people, the special dwelling-place of Yahweh. Where the Temple was, there the people ought to worship. As this idea gripped the mind of the nation the high places were more and more regarded as in opposition to the Temple and the real religion of the nation. We cannot trace out all the details for lack of space, but we can see the result of these thoughts in the life of the people. The reforms begun by Hezekiah (II Kings 18:4) became the watchword of a certain party in the nation. The good work begun by the father was hindered by his idolatrous son Manasseh, who allowed the worst abominations to find a place in the nation, but the party called into being by the reform of Hezekiah, a party whose faith had been established by the defeat of Sennacherib, worked

on quietly and in secret. The prophets were silenced though not kept from writing, as we can see from additions made to some of the prophetic writings. The child Josiah seems to have come under the influence of this party, for we find a reform taking place during the reign of this king. These, however, are but minor events. An epoch-making event was soon to revolutionize all the life of the nation. Quietly and in secret some writers had been at work upon a new Code. Not daring to put it forth they laid it away in the Temple, hoping that the time would come when they could proclaim it to the nation. Perhaps some died before the opportune time came. But the time did come and Deuteronomy was given to the nation. We cannot deal with all the problems involved. Suffice it to say that if the defeat of Sennacherib had done nothing more than merely lead to the writing of this book our title would be justified. Deuteronomy, however, was not the end. The day of the finding of the Book of Deuteronomy was a turning-point in the history of the religion of the nation and of the world.

It made a written Law the rule of the people's life and worship and thus it became the first step toward the creation of the Old Testament Canon. By its centralization of the worship at Jerusalem and abolition of the local sanctuaries, it initiated a movement that was carried forward by Ezekiel and culminated in the Priestly Code which has dominated Judaism to this day.¹

Before the Exile the message of Deuteronomy could not be carried out to the full. When the Exile was over a people had been prepared who would

¹ Peake, *The Bible, Its Origin, Its Significance, and Its Abiding Worth*, p. 238.

fulfil the Law. The Exile broke the ties binding these people to the numerous sanctuaries. It also taught them the necessity of finding a new way of approach to Yahweh. The Sabbath took on new meaning, and spiritual life had at last an opportunity of making itself felt. We cannot speak of the rise of the synagogue and the reading and meditating upon the written Word. What an influence Deuteronomy had upon Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Second and Third Isaiahs we shall not be able to trace in detail. The influence of the book is upon them, however, and their influence upon the exiles was immeasurable.

The deliverance from Sennacherib, the Exile, the messages learned during the Exile impressed upon the people the sense of their unique standing among the nations of the world. The Second Isaiah taught them that they were the "servant of Yahweh" to the nations. They were taught that their sufferings were the vicarious endurance of suffering which the heathen had deserved." The influence of this on the later life and thought of the Jewish and Christian churches it is impossible to measure. Jesus himself helped to fix the idea in the minds of his followers and under the hand of Paul it was built into the theology of the church for all time.

Space forbids our tracing out the messianic hope of the Jewish people. Too many critical questions arise for such a treatment in an article such as this, and we can only refer the reader to works dealing with the subject.¹ It is enough to state that from the time

of the Second Isaiah, who asked, as no other had asked, the meaning of the Exile, the hope steadily grew to maturity. Gradually the national gave place to the individual interpretation until in the Book of Daniel among the canonical books, and in the Book of Enoch and the Psalms of Solomon among the non-canonical, we reach the picture of King Messiah. "A righteous king and taught of God is he that reigneth over them; and there shall be no iniquity in his days in their midst, for all shall be holy, and their king is the Lord Messiah."²

The preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ is too well known to need treatment here, though there is a danger that familiarity allows us to go over the ground without exercising that care so necessary to a correct understanding of the rise of the idea. It had its beginnings in obscurity but its later growth is due to the literature produced in the course of the history of his own people, and the greater part of this has its place in the world today because the nation was saved when the angel of the Lord smote the army of Sennacherib before the walls of Jerusalem.

Judging it in the light of all that flowed from it we feel safe in saying that the event dealt with above is the most important in ancient history. In the words of the late W. R. Smith, "the event, so inconsiderable in its outward consequences, has had more influence on the life of subsequent generations than all the conquests of Assyrian kings; for it assured the permanent vitality of that religion which was the cradle of Christianity."³

¹ Moulton, *The Witness of Israel*; Fairweather, *The Background of the Gospels*. The numerous works of Dr. R. H. Charles are all-important if one would know the background.

² Psalms of Solomon 17:35-36.

³ *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 356.